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The Montana Natural Heritage Program

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Providing information for responsible land-use decisions.

Cover Photo: Dancing Prairie, a remnant palouse grassland. DON SIAS

Finding a Balance

Montana's vast and imposing landscape has always been part of the state's history, people, and wealth. This land has provided assets such as timber, minerals, and fertile soil, as well as the invaluable resources of clean water and air, abundant wildlife, and open space.

Montana's well-being and economic health are directly dependent upon responsible stewardship of this land and the life it supports. However, population and land-use pressures continue to increase, placing tremendous demands on our surroundings. We must learn to balance these pressures with the need to protect our natural heritage.

One of the first steps towards achieving a balance is to identify and locate those biological resources which have become most vulnerable. Only then can we plan responsible development which safeguards those resources.

In order to provide a centralized information source on biologically critical areas and species, the State of Montana established the Montana Natural Heritage Program in 1985.

Lemhi beardtongue (*Penstemon lemhiensis*), a regional endemic found in southwestern Montana.
STEVE SHELLY

The ferruginous hawk (*Buteo regalis*) is a sensitive indicator species.
CRAIG SHARPE

The Montana Natural Heritage Program

The Montana Natural Heritage Program systematically collects information on Montana's sensitive or threatened biological features. Staff members consolidate natural resource information from diverse sources such as field surveys, resource management agencies, published and unpublished reports, and the academic and scientific community. They research and record facts: the existence, numbers, location, condition, and status of species and biological communities.

The Montana Natural Heritage Program strives to obtain and provide objective data which can serve the broadest possible range of users. Data are managed in an easily accessible system of topographical maps, computer databases, and manual files.

Unlike many other biological surveys, the Montana Natural Heritage Program is ongoing—a cumulative inventory designed for continuous updating and refinement. Program information becomes increasingly comprehensive with each year of operation.

The Montana Natural Heritage Program is a joint ventu be
Montana and The Nature Conservancy, an international on
*organization. The program is linked to similar Natural Herit*ge
*operating in 49 states and 14 foreign countries. It is admini*ere
*Information System (NRIS) and is housed in the Montana Sta*te

*Funding is provided by a variety of sources, including: g*nts
Resource Indemnity Trust Fund; the Montana Department Fi
federal grant funds through the Montana Department of Sta La
Surface Mining Reclamation Enforcement); small contracts wit
*Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, etc.); and pri*te
contracts and The Nature Conservancy.

Left: Wetland communities harbor a diversity of plant and animal species to
Above: Natural habitat of Lemhi beardtongue (*Penstemon lemhiensis*) in the one

How To Use The Program

Information from this statewide inventory is available to the public and has already proved to be a valuable tool, used by federal, state, and county agencies, industry, consulting firms, universities, conservation organizations, and individuals.

The Montana Natural Heritage Program can respond to data requests based on any number of search criteria, including:

- geographic location (township-range-section, latitude-longitude, county, watershed, USGS quadrangle, etc.);
- species or biological communities;
- areas under special management (national forests, state parks, wildlife refuges, etc.);
- land ownership (federal, state, private, etc.);
- protection status (federally listed, state protected, etc.).

To place a data request, contact the Montana Natural Heritage Program with the following information:

- type of data needed;
- the geographic area of concern, including either a map of the area or a precise description.

For most requests, response time is within one week.

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ON SIAS
oneer Mountains. STEVE SHELLY

Small yellow lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium calceolus* VAR. *parviflorum*), an orchid found in western Montana. STEVE SHELLY

Examples of Program Use Include:

Top: Fluvial Arctic grayling (*Thymallus arcticus montanus*) make their last stand in the upper Big Hole River. JAN WASSINK

Above: RICK GRAETZ PHOTO

- a government agency requested information on all sensitive plant species found within the Bitterroot National Forest;

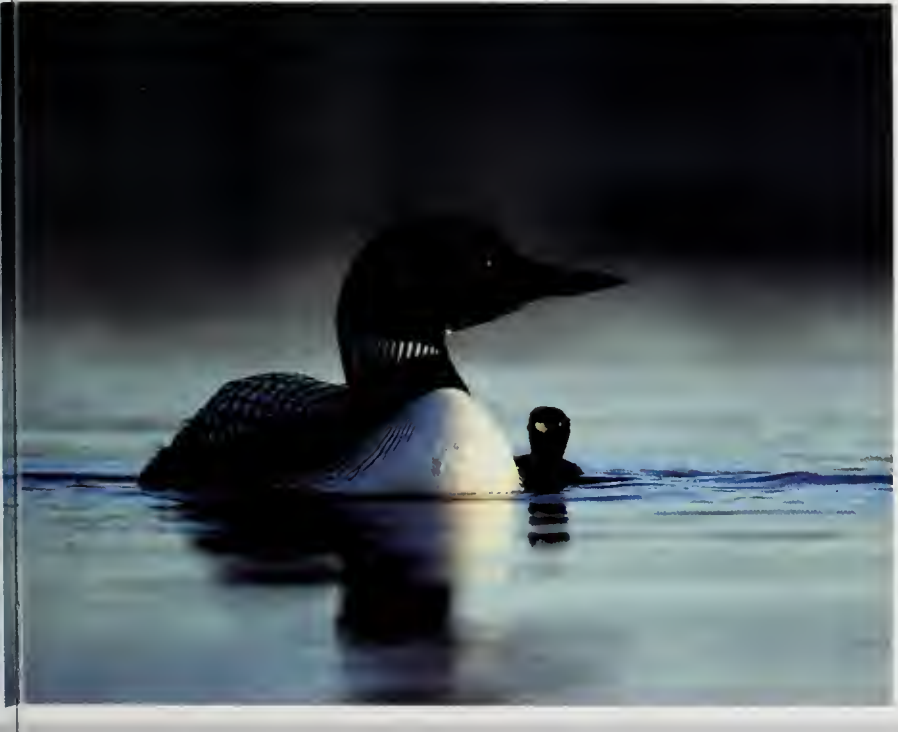
- a consulting firm preparing an environmental impact statement requested data on sensitive species within a 5-mile radius of a proposed mine site;

- a utility company needed biological data on areas within the path of a proposed transmission line;

- a state agency verified whether road construction would affect a sensitive vertebrate population;

- a conservation organization requested information on the biological significance of several rivers.

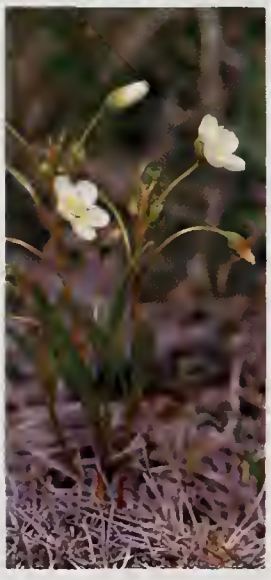
By using the Montana Natural Heritage Program, planners, developers, and other decision-makers become aware of the possible biological effects of a project while it is still in the planning stage—before financial commitments have been made. Inadvertent environmental impacts, as well as unexpected delays and expense, can thereby be avoided.



ing loons (*Gavia immer*) require special management considerations.
AEL QUINTON

With wise planning, the preservation of Montana's natural heritage can accompany growth and development.

The Montana Natural Heritage Program is providing the foundation needed for balanced growth and conservation: sound reliable information from which responsible resource decisions can be made.



Montana Natural Heritage Program

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The Nature Conservancy

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Top: Old-growth cedar forest (*Thuja plicata*). RICK GRAETZ
Inset: Springbeauty (*Claytonia lanceolata* VAR. *flava*), known globally from seven sites, five of which are in Montana. PETER LESICA